An Excellent Match: Literacy Portfolios and ESP

By Ann M. Johns

Throughout the considerable history of English for Specific Purposes, practitioners have been seeking ways to design curricula and assessment that balance the demands of the target situations in which their students will be using English and the necessity for developing literacy processes and practices that enable students to respond to these English-saturated situations. Thus, we have been attempting to balance the socio-cultural requirements of the context of use with the psycholinguistic-cognitive needs of the learners. In literacy portfolios, practitioners have found a valuable tool in advancing these efforts.

Literacy Portfolios Defined

What are literacy portfolios, and why are they particularly useful to ESP programs? Ideal ESP programs are designed for identified groups of learners within specific contexts, (Johns and Dudley-Evans 1991); therefore every ESP portfolio program should be constructed somewhat differently. However, there are also commonalties, general features of literacy portfolios that are present in nearly every teaching/learning context. Figure 1 lists and explains these shared features, elements that distinguish portfolios from other pedagogical tools and suggest their particular value to ESP. (See Figure 1 below)

Essential to understanding the power of literacy portfolios is acknowledging what they are not. Portfolios are not folders of all students' work completed during a given period of time. Instead, they consist of selected entries compiled in accordance with class goals. Though generally integral to student assessment, these entries are not merely timed measures of proficiency administered once--tests unrepresentative of what students are capable of accomplishing (Johns 1991; Ruetten 1994). Instead, portfolios display a *variety* of *student work* produced *under diverse conditions and collected during a specified period of time* . The entries are designed to demonstrate students' literacy growth and change as realized and measured in different ways. Also central to the purposes of literacy portfolios are the *reflections* or commentaries on the entries. Through these reflections, students can develop metacognitive awareness of texts and situations (the socio-cultural) and of their processes and strategies when approaching various texts or tasks (the psycho-linguistic/ cognitive). Students may also be encouraged to judge their own work in their reflections and to compare several of their attempts to perform literacy tasks.

Developing an ESP Portfolio Program

Portfolio programs must be carefully designed, because predesign, planning, and management are essential to their success. What design elements must practitioners consider as they plan an ESP portfolio curriculum? Below I have listed the key elements, though other steps may be necessary in some ESP situations.

1. Determine portfolio roles within the curriculum. ESP teachers need to determine what pedagogical roles a portfolio will play. Will the portfolio design attempt to integrate the entire curriculum? If not, what roles will portfolios play within the ESP courses? What curricular elements will they displace? (see Footnote 1 below) These are difficult decisions, particularly for teachers who have not had much experience with these tools. Initially, it may be advisable to design mini-portfolios (with two or three entries) representing only a portion of the class grade--perhaps 25%--with complete credit given to students for completion. As teachers become more comfortable with portfolios, they can increase the complexity of portfolio evaluation and the importance of this tool within the curriculum.

2. Make student assessment decisions. ESP practitioners also need to make decisions about assessment: How entries--and the entire student portfolio--will be evaluated. In some programs, every entry is graded individually before it is inserted into the portfolio; there are separate grades for each entry and for the portfolio as a whole. In other programs, such as the one in which I teach, entries are not graded separately. Instead, the entire portfolio is scored holistically by the teaching staff at the end of the term.

As mentioned earlier, those just beginning a portfolio program may want to be conservative initially, designing a tool that represents a small portion of the students' grade within individual classrooms. However, as time goes on and more experience is gained, instructors may decide to assess each other's student portfolios using predetermined criteria. In my program, we have found that there are several secondary benefits to this group assessment; for example, we can gain insights into the approaches and assignments characteristic of other classes at the same level while we read our colleagues' student portfolios.

3. Study requirements of the target situation. Whatever the roles of a portfolio in curriculum and assessment, certain ESP essentials pertain. One basic ESP component is the Target Situation Analysis (TSA) (See Robinson l991). Through this analysis, practitioners attempt to understand and exploit for the curricula the languages and discourses, values and practices of the context(s) in which the students will be using English.

For purposes of ESP reading and writing portfolio design, for example, special TSA attention might be paid to the "genres," or text types which students will be reading or writing in English, considering the nature of these texts and the functions they serve within their respective discourse communities (Swales l990). TSAs of situated texts and their functions can involve surveying or interviewing experts within the target displiniary community, observing community initiates--and student novices--as they read or write, consulting literacy research, and collecting text exemplars. From the results of these TSAs, we can decide what kinds of entries are most appropriate for a particular ESP portfolio design.

In my university's multiple-class English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, we surveyed faculty across our campus to determine what types of pedagogical texts our students would be asked to process in content classrooms. We also observed and interviewed our students in their introductory content classes linked with our EAP classes. (see Footnote 2 below) Our research has assisted us in making decisions about entry categories. For our EAP novice students, reading requirements were quite simple to identify: Textbooks are the principal sources of information. However, the writing assignments are more varied and complex, and since our classes emphasize composition, we devoted considerable time to the writing entries. Like Horowitz (1986), we discovered that essay examinations were the most common type of pedagogical writing; however, faculty also assigned other pedagogical texts to which they gave a variety of names such as "term paper," "extended essay," "take-home examination," and "abstract." Because we could not create distinct descriptions for each of these overlapping, or "blurred" (Bhatia 1993) pedagogical genres, we decided to design entries that reflect the repeated strategies required for production of these texts.

We also chose to require an entry that would encourage students to interact with "authentic" (see Footnote 3 below) disciplinary genres rather than pedagogical texts that have little value within the faculty disciplinary communities (See Johns 1995). We called this entry category a *genre-based text* and consulted faculty experts about the genres that were central to the communicative purposes within their disciplines.

Like all of the entry categories in our EAP portfolio, this one permitted considerable variation among classes in the EAP program. In some classes, for example, the genre-based text entry was an abstract from a faculty research article; in others, it was an effort to replicate a genre such as a case study; in others, it was a summary critique of a genre.

4. Determine student needs. Like the TSA, the Needs Assessment (NA) is a central element in ESP curriculum design. (Robinson l991). For ESP portfolios, student needs can encompass issues such as their wants and interests, language proficiencies, strategy needs, learning styles, and text processing. (See Hutchinson and Waters 1987.)

Needs can be measured through conventional student examinations, interviews or questionnaires (See, for example, Davis, Nur and Ruru, l994), but they can also be assessed by observing students or interviewing experts. In our NAs, we have found that faculty suggest a careful reading and deconstruction of essay examination questions, but that many of our students tend to quickly read an essay question then forge ahead to write about the content without considering required organization, argumentation, or values of the content classroom and its disciplinary community. On the other hand, experts tell us that they read familiar longer texts selectively, whereas our students tend to read every text in the same way, word for word.

There are many ways to conduct needs assessments and many methods for discovery. If possible, these assessments should be ongoing and varied, exploiting a number of approaches to answering the same questions.

5. Determine class goals. After examination of the target situation and student needs, class goals should be developed. TSA-related goals might be to introduce students to a variety of text types,

discourses that differ in terms of register, organization and purposes served within a particular community. Another TSA related possibility might be to encourage an understanding of the differences between like genres, such as sales letters, in British and American Englishor the differences between these genres in students' first languages and English. (See Jenkins and Hinds 1987). Goals relating to student needs can encourage the development of metacognitive awareness of their own processes when approaching various types of literacy tasks or lead to the expansion of their reading strategy repertoires.

Figure 2 lists the goals that we have developed for our EAP program, based upon TSA and needs-assessment results. (See Figure 2 below)

6. Make entry decisions: At this point, we must make definitive decisions about how many entries and what kinds should be included in the portfolio, and at what point in the term these entries will be inserted. Generally, a portfolio for a 15 week (45 hour) term contains no more than 5 entries, each of which reflects a cluster of course goals and classroom assignments. Figure 3 lists the five writing entries in our EAP portfolio, in addition to a required end-of-semester reflection. (See Figure 3 below)

ESP practitioners also need to determine who will select the actual entries to be included. In some programs, the entry categories are determined by the curriculum designers or teachers; however, the actual examples for the individual portfolios are chosen by the students. Thus, a "timed essay" may be a predetermined entry category, but the students are free to select which of their timed essays to include. In our EAP program, entry categories are predetermined, but each classroom is free to develop its own decision process. Thus, in some classes, students make most of the selections; in others, the EAP instructors decide which texts should be included.

Designers also need to determine when the entries will be inserted into the portfolio. In some programs, students may revise or replace entries throughout the semester. In others there are specific dates for entry inclusion after which no changes in this entry category may be made. These decisions depend upon another factor: How the portfolio will be evaluated. For example, will each entry be graded before it is inserted? Will some entries remain ungraded? In our program, no entry is graded before it is inserted; holistic portfolio grading takes place at the end of term. (See Footnote 4 below)

7. Make portfolio management decisions. Good management of portfolios throughout a term--or a longer period--is crucial to the success of a portfolio program. Figure 4 includes some suggestions for managing and promoting portfolios (see Figure 4 below). As can be seen, we advocate requiring all students to buy the same type of binder at the beginning to the term, recording on each of the divider tabs the category for each required entry. On the inside of the binder, the students paste a list of entry categories and due dates, so that they can keep an ongoing record. In most of our EAP classes, certain days are set aside for "audits," at which time students assess their progress, exchange or peer-edit entries, write reflections or are introduced to a new entry category.

Some Benefits of a Portfolio Program

Having been an instructor in an EAP portfolio program for a number of years, and having observed portfolio use in other ESP contexts, I am convinced that these pedagogical tools provide for teachers both the structure and the flexibility necessary for meeting the needs of a particular group of students within an ESP learning/teaching situation.

Students also find portfolios useful for a number of reasons: they organize classwork and make goals transparent; they offer opportunities for comparison; they provide a measure for progress and change; and they assist students in correcting and revising their work. They also give students several chances to demonstrate what they can accomplish.

Two excerpts from end-of-semester (unedited) portfolio reflections indicate their importance to the students in our ESP composition program for first year university students:

Reflection 1: This semester we prepared a portfolio in which we organized five papers. In this portfolio, you will find my migratory history paper [*the genre-based text*], my library assignment [*the source-based text*], my research paper [*the data-driven text*], my abstract and my timed essay. These papers are a collective representation of my written work throughout this past semester. Each paper served a different purpose in my growth as a writer.

Reflection 2: *A portfolio is a collection of the activities and homeworks I did in class as well as at home. The portfolio helped me to become a better organizer. By having a nice, neat portfolio, I can easily look up or turn to the paper I wanted to study.

A portfolio can help me to become a better writer. *Since a portfolio is a collection of the works I did, so I can look back to my earlier works. *By looking back, I can improve my weaknesses such as grammar and sentence structure. *I can also compare my earlier works with the later ones to see if I have improved or not. I really enjoy working with a portfolio.

Much more could be and has been said about the uses of portfolios in ESP and elsewhere. However, I hope that this short overview will encourage those not already using this tool to consider it for their classes.

Ann M. Johns teaches English for Academic Purposes at San Diego State University (CA). She has done ESP teaching and teacher training in China, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, France, and Singapore.

References

- Belanoff, P. and M. Dickson, eds. 1991. Portfolios: Process and product. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton Cook.
- Bhatia, V. 1993. Analyzing genre: Language use in professional settings. London: Longman.

- Brinton, D., M. A. Snow, and M. B. Wesche. 1989. Content-based second language instruction. New York: Newbury House.
- Davis, E. C., H. Nur, and S. A. A. Ruru. 1994. Helping teachers and students understand learning styles. English Teaching Forum, 32, 3, pp. 12-19.
- Horowitz, D. M. 1986. Essay examination prompts and the teaching of academic writing. English for Specific Purposes, 5, pp. 197-220.
- Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters. 1987. English for Specific Purposes: A learner-centered approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, S. and J. Hinds. 1987. Business letter writing: English, French and Japanese. TESOL Quarterly, 21, pp. 327-349.
- Johns, A. M. 1995. Using classroom and authentic genres: Student initiation into academic writing. In Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy, eds. D. Belcher and G. Braine New York: Ablex.
- ----. 1991. Interpreting an English competency examination: The frustrations of an ESL science student. Written Communication, 8, pp. 379-401.
- Johns, A. M. and T. Dudley-Evans. 1991. English for Specific Purposes: International in scope, specific in purpose. TESOL Quarterly, 25, pp. 297-314.
- Murphy, S. and M. A. Smith. 1992. Writing portfolios: Bridge from teaching to assessment. Markham, Ontario: Pippin Publishing Company.
- Robinson, P. 1991. ESP today: A practitioner's guide. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Ruetten, M. K. 1994. Evaluating ESL students' performance on proficiency exams. Journal of Second Language Writing, 3, pp. 85-86.
- Swales, J. M. 1990. Genre Analysis: English in academic and research settings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Tierney, R. J., M. A. Carter, and L. E. Desai. l991. Portfolios assessment in the reading/writing classroom. Norwood, MA: Christopher Clordon.

Figure 1

Shared Portfolio Features

1. Portfolios are COLLECTIONS, representing students' work over time.

2. They are representative of CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT GOALS of a program.

3. The entries are SELECTED for specific purposes.

4. Entries are collected OVER TIME, so that students, parents, administrators, and teachers canmeasure change.

5. Portfolios include REFLECTIONS upon the entries that encourage students to evaluate their own work and their strategies forapproaching tasks.

Figure 2

Class Goals--a University EAP Writing Program

1. To process and/or produce a variety of texts under a variety of circumstances.

2. To develop and demonstrate awareness of a range of discourse styles in public prose, including academic discourses.

3. To increase a repertoire of strategies for approaching different reading and writing tasks.

4. To demonstrate awareness of the possibilities for multiple critical interpretations of subject matter and texts by both faculty and students.

5. To develop a sense of power and motivation in relation to the language, contexts, topics and texts of academic disciplines.

Note: These are the goals for the classes in the Integrated Curriculum, San Diego State University, California (USA).

Figure 3

Figure 3: Entry Categories for An English for Academic

Purposes Writing Program

Entry 1: A Source-driven text. This paper must draw from written sources, from content classes, from the library, or from elsewhere. It should make use of citation, referencing and other research paper practices.

Entry 2: A Data-driven text. This paper should also indicate students' abilities to integrate "foreign" information into their own discourses. The data included in this paper should come from sources such as observation, interview, films or other non written sources.

Entry 3: An abstract/summary. This text should be an abbreviated version of another discourse. Among many possibilities can be an abstract of the student's own paper, written for Entries 1 or 2, or a summary/ critique of a film or book.

Entry 4: A Genre-based Text. This text must reflect in some way a genre of an academic discipline. It could attempt to replicate a genre; it could summarize orabstract a research article or grant; it could analyze or critique a text within a genre category.

Entry 5: A Timed essay. This is an essay written in an EAP or content class under timed circumstances. It can be graded, though the grade on the essay will not influence the portfolio grade.

Semester Reflection. Each student must write a reflection of one or two pages considering the entries in the portfolio in some way. For example, they can use entry examples to discuss their literacy practices, or they can discuss how they approached the writingeach entry. They can also discuss differences among genres as exemplified in the entry types.

Figure 4

Figure 4: Portfolio Management

One of the most difficult aspects of portfolio use is management: keeping track of entries and progress in portfolio completion and encouraging a high level of motivation. Here are some suggestions for managing in the classroom:

1. Require all students to buy a binder with tabs that will become the portfolio. Ask students to write the entry categories on the tabs and affix a "management sheet" with categories and dates due at the front of the portfolio.

2. Discuss the portfolio, its purposes, rules, and procedures at the beginning of the term and on several other occasions. Remind students frequently of their portfolio commitments.

3. Perform "Portfolio Audits" occasionally so that students can assess their progress and reorganize their portfolios.

4. Make very clear to all students what you value in the portfolios and remind them of how the portfolios will be graded.

5. Give students opportunities to show off their portfolios. For example, they can give portfolio presentations to other classes, faculty or administrators; they can have a contest for the most creative portfolio design; or they can write introductions (or reflections) to readers, who then respond.

Footnote 1

See especially, Murphy and Smith (1992) and Tierney, et. al. (1991), volumes designed for teachers who have not had much assistance in making these decisions.

Footnote 2

We refer to our program as "linked" because this term indicates a balanced, cooperative effort among EAP and content class instructors. However "adjunct" is a more common term in the

literature. (See Brinton, et. al. 1989.)

Footnote 3

I put "authentic" in quotes because many argue that all texts, pedagogical or disciplinary, EAP or content, are authentic in some way.

Footnote 4

At other EAP sites, portfolios are graded twice: at midterm and at the end of term. This practice alerts students to their progress and assists teachers in keeping up with the curriculum.